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ABSTRACT

Information on current trends and issues informally discussed and then delineated by the directors of six National Council of Teachers of English commissions, is presented in this 15th annual report. The commissions and their directors are: (1) Commission on Composition (Christine Kline); (2) Commission on Curriculum (Kathleen Rowlands); (3) Commission on Language (Judith Wells Lindfors); (4) Commission on Literature (Carol Jago); (5) Commission on Media (Lawrence B. Fuller); and (6) Commission on Reading (Mary H. Maguire). Some of the subjects discussed in the report include: assessment; professional standards for writing teachers; the need for further attention to second language perspectives; the tendency of legislators, publishers, and others to use simple terms to redefine complex processes; legislative bodies mandating curriculum and assessment; trends mandating specific methodology for elementary and secondary classrooms and teacher education programs; role of research in relation to classroom practices in English/language arts; supporting students' right to their own languages; language awareness study for teacher and students; state standards documents overlooking the study of literature as an important and lasting outcome of a high school education; the rapid growth of applications of new media technology in U.S. business, homes, and schools; support for public schooling; professional development of reading teachers; informed discussion about reading, theory, research and practice; and understanding the complex intersections among race, class, gender, and language in reading, literacy curriculum, and practices in mainstream, bilingual multicultural communities. (RS)

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TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH INSTRUCTION, 1998—SIX SUMMARIES

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Summaries of Informal Annual Discussions of the Commissions of the National Council of Teachers of English

Compiled by Carol Porter, NCTE

During their meetings at the recent Convention, the six NCTE commissions informally discussed professional trends and issues. While the ideas below do not constitute official positions of NCTE or unanimous opinions of a particular commission, they do offer challenging, informed points of view. This is the fifteenth annual trends and issues report by the commissions.

Commission on Composition (Christine Kline, Director). Discussions by members of the Commission on Composition centered on three major issues: assessment, professional standards for teachers of writing, and the need for further attention to second language perspectives. Questions were raised about the congruence of many writing assessment models to the complexity of composing and about the use of single writing samples to make broad judgments. Members also voiced concerns about who was monitoring and assessing the state assessments. Commission members believe that there is crucial need to gather further information about the state assessments.

Members are also concerned about the lack of professional standards in the teaching of writing. In colleges and universities, it is entirely possible that faculty members with no background in the teaching of writing are currently teaching courses in writing. In K-12 schools, teachers responsible for the teaching of writing may have been provided with little or no training. Members believe that writing projects are providing the most effective and transformative graduate experiences and are concerned that few districts seek projects as a major resource. Members urge continued attention to the need for professional standards in the teaching of writing and to the need for major staff development at all levels.

Another major issue in composition is the continuing need for second language perspectives in composition studies. Research in this area continues to grow and deserves the full support of the Council.

Two trends were also discussed during the Commission sessions. The first, noted by the Commission in the two previous years, is the increasing use of computers in writing classrooms and the consequent need to expand research on the relationships among computers, writing and learning at all levels of schooling. The second trend is the diminishing presence of writing in public and academic discussions about literacy. Due partly to the current reading debates and the energy needed to respond to narrow definitions of reading, the importance of writing is being eclipsed even before it has achieved parity with reading in literacy studies and school practices. Members of the Commission urge the Council to steadily and explicitly acknowledge the critical role of writing in learning to read and the indivisibility of writing from reading. We must take

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role of writing in learning to read and the indivisibility of writing from reading. We must take care, in our current efforts to effectively combat narrow definitions of reading, that we do not define it in narrow terms. Further, attention to reading should not eclipse the critical need for continued attention to writing in research and policy arenas, in staff and curriculum development efforts, and in informed classroom practice.

Commission on Curriculum (Kathleen Rowlands, Director). The Commission is alarmed by the growing tendency of legislators, publishers, and others to use simple terms to redefine complex processes, or to apply simple solutions to complex problems. Such attempts trivialize the curriculum because limited content materials and activities restrict the responses, the thinking, and the learning of students. For example, recent state and federal legislation defines reading as little more than decoding, and restricts classroom reading to "decodable" or "leveled" texts--unauthentic prose concocted primarily for the purposes of teaching phonemic awareness. Further, this legislation mandates that teachers restrict themselves to a limited repertoire of teaching strategies (those strategies, in fact, least likely to encourage either the development of reading ability or the love of reading), thus establishing a deplorable trend toward reducing complex acts to simple-minded formulas and recipes. These political intrusions deprive children of the opportunity to respond intelligently to texts and to their world, prevent them from learning to interpret texts and events, and deny them the opportunity to find and examine the personal and social significance in texts and experiences, thus limiting development of their linguistic power.

Such strategies lower standards rather than raise them. Restricting the research modes allowed to shape discussion of language and literacy and its teaching limits the exploration of learning processes and strangles the free exchange of ideas, a process crucial to the preservation of a democratic society. However, the Commission encourages all efforts to support a variety of research approaches by those working intimately in classroom and school settings, particularly teachers.

Further, the Commission strongly opposes the mandating of curriculum and assessment by legislative bodies, dictating methods and strategies that may well be in direct conflict, not only with what 25 years of experience and research have demonstrated about best practice in the teaching of language and literature, but also with the democratic principles these elected officials are charged with defending.

Although assessment embedded in instructional practice is commendable, the Commission notes the danger of assessments that reduce evaluation to the measurement of a few specific but incomplete indicators of literacy. While seductive in that they are often easily quantifiable, such measures reduce learning and teaching to discreet tasks (such as decoding or the reading of decontextualized passages) reflecting the misguided hope that parts will accurately represent the whole. They can not.

Consideration of curriculum must go hand in hand with consideration of teacher development. The Commission is concerned about the growing belief that effective professional development can be achieved by reliance on scripted materials, pre-packaged programs, and mandated changes

in classroom practice. This leads to an emphasis on rote learning, the transmission of static and isolated knowledge, and eventually to limited learning opportunities for both teachers and students. This trend devalues the professional voices and experiences of classroom teachers and denies their active role in their own and their students' learning. Furthermore, this disconcerting trend has a disproportionate impact on low achieving students and minority populations.

The Commission strongly believes in the need for greater linguistic awareness. Teachers need to help students become aware of the intricacies of language in all forms, including the language they bring to the classroom. In addition, the Commission urges renewed emphasis on language study--language history, dialects, nuances of language use, and the implications of language choice. The Commission encourages any language study that leads to increased recognition and appreciation of the power language has on human response.

In these difficult times, we applaud efforts by members of the profession to promote the lay public's understandings of the complexities of language learning and teaching and the dissemination of facts instead of frenzy.

Commission on Language (Judith Wells Lindfors, Director). Trends Mandating Specific Methodology for Elementary and Secondary Classrooms and Teacher Education Programs. We seek to speak out against moves to reduce teachers' professional autonomy. For example, we need to oppose legal mandates (e.g., state laws) which:

a. impose phonics instruction (e.g., in California);
b. require that phonics be taught in teacher education programs;
c. require IEPs for Special Education students;
d. prohibit the use of dialogue journals in classrooms.

The Role of Research in Relation to Classroom Practices in the English/Language Arts. Given the use of the term "replicable, reliable, research" to control research and practices in reading, it is necessary to support teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and educational researchers to unpack the political rhetoric of such language. Aspects that need to be considered in responding to this issue include:

a. the reciprocal relationships between research and practice;
b. the limitations of research when it is applied in an isomorphic (one-to-one) way to classroom instruction, without teacher knowledge and understanding;
c. the paradigmatic differences of educational research designs (e.g., experimental, case study, ethnographic);
d. the role of theory (of the nature of society, power relationships, language, learning, and teaching) in informing classroom practice, in addition to the role of research.

Supporting Students' Right to Their Own Languages. Students have the right to access, think about, read, write, speak, and listen to material of their choice. This right includes both the content of their choice, and also linguistically, politically, culturally, and generationally varied

voices. Students should also have the freedom to exercise their right in the aforementioned areas in their own languages, dialects, and registers, whatever these might be, and from their own cultural perspectives, without fear of threats, reprisals, and/or degradation.

Language Awareness Study for Teachers and Students. Integrating language awareness study into the classroom is a necessary means of creating coherence between the language knowledge of teachers and that of students. This knowledge base must be innovatively presented to both teachers and students, primarily through the concept of language use and the validity of speech and writing practiced and used by all students.

Presently this concern is unhighlighted in NCTE material or other forms of communication. As new strategies are being designed for overcoming the divisions in the language arts, classroom integration of language study must become a priority.

Commission on Literature (Carol Jago, Director). The commission has observed that many state standards documents under construction seem to be overlooking the study of literature as an important and lasting outcome of a high school education. While workplace and voter literacy are most certainly worthy goals, so is the study of literature.

In the January, 1997 issue of *College English,* Marshall Gregory, Harry Ice Professor of English at Butler University, posits six contributions to student development made by the study of literature as a discipline:

1. The **literary content** of English contributes to students' intellectual development by giving them the ways and means of delving into the importance of story, and, through story, of having vicarious experiences of the human condition far vaster than any of them could ever acquire on the basis of luck and first-hand encounters.

2. The **cognitive skills** acquired through the study of literature support the critical reading of texts, the precise use of language and the creation of sound arguments.

3. Students develop an **aesthetic sensitivity** that trains them to recognize and respond to art.

4. **Intra and Intercultural awareness** developed and enriched by the reading of multicultural texts.

5. Students develop an **ethical sensitivity** which includes both the ability to regulate conduct according to principles and the ability to deliberate about issues both in their own heads and in dialogue with others.

6. Students develop **existential maturity** which is more easily defined by what it is not than by what it is. It is not self-centeredness, it is not unkindness, it is not pettiness, it is not petulance, it is not callousness to the suffering of others, it is not backbiting or violent competitiveness, it is not mean-spiritedness, it is not dogmatism or fanaticism, it is not a lack of self-control, it is not the inability ever to be detached or ironic, it is not the refusal

to engage in give-and-take learning from others, and it is not the assumption that what we personally desire and value is what everyone else desires and values.

When the study of literature can accomplish so much (and so much that law enforcement and social services struggle in vain to accomplish), it is foolhardy for society to shortchange this element of the curriculum.

Commission on Media (Lawrence B. Fuller, Director). The Commission on Media notes the rapid growth of applications of new media technology in American businesses, homes, and schools. As costs for such equipment plummet and skill in employing the technologies develops, this trend should intensify. Increasingly, these technologies involve children in more than a receiving mode, primarily listening, reading, and viewing. Rather, children interact with these media--writing e-mail, creating web sites, producing videos, responding to teachers from distance learning sites. Like speech and print, then, these new media are means to mastering subject matter, thinking critically, creating aesthetically. Instead of a bulging portfolio, many students can provide a computer disk or video or audio tape which contains evidence of their learning and thinking. So popular is such new media work that some schools have media clubs which for many in this generation serve purposes similar to forensics and drama groups, literary magazines and newspapers. These developments have helped modify the mode of learning from the individual student working silently with paper and pencil to the group working collaboratively with a computer or camcorder.

This growth in media applications is reflected nationally and internationally in standards documents like the NCTE/IRA Standards for English language arts. Various media literacy standards are being adopted widely by state departments of education, academic disciplines, teacher training institutions, and individual districts. However, standards for media literacy can only be implemented in classrooms when individual teachers, both pre- and in-service, understand the relevant concepts and pedagogy.

This transition in how children learn is not universally understood, much less welcomed. For some groups the new technologies represent dangers to be attacked by banning or limiting the new media, especially television, films, and popular music from classrooms and home. Sometimes the rationale is that the content is banal or morally objectionable; other times the assumption is that reading and writing skills will flourish without electronic competition. Such critics also point justifiably to the reality that some inadequately prepared teachers use film, television, and popular music not as a means to enrich the curriculum or to help students comprehend each medium's practices, aesthetics, and ideology, but to "baby sit" or reward students for good behavior. These critics raise valid points, but to prevent children from developing media literacy is a disservice to young people in the long run.

Other critics, while not calling for banning media education, attack teachers for their choices of particular works or programs for classroom use, or for allowing the students themselves to pursue interests and activities that strike the critics as unsuitable. Such critics often would limit classroom study to only those products bearing the most general viewing and listening rating

labels. Teachers, admittedly, need to consider the children's maturity and the values of the community when introducing controversial subject matter. However, adults must realize that older children, especially, need to address controversial issues in rational, thoughtful ways, not be told that they are not ready. Compounding the problem is that many teachers, both novices and veterans, are poorly or completely unprepared to deal effectively with the educational opportunities these new media technologies and their software and texts provide. In too many cases young teachers emerge from pre-service university programs with minimal or no mastery to such technologies except what they pick up haphazardly through occasional research and writing assignments. Veteran teachers often receive little support to upgrade their competencies through in-service training, graduate study, or purchase of up-to-date equipment. Such problems especially affect poorly funded or managed urban and rural schools. What was state of the art a decade earlier is often obsolete. Sadly, the gulf widens between children whose families and schools can afford these media technologies and the relevant instruction, and those who lack the means.

Even those teachers who implement these new media technologies and texts often do not fully comprehend the legitimate restraints on their practice like copyright law and state and school district policies. This ignorance can lead to legal and professional complications that can cause litigation and end careers. Furthermore, all teachers must realize that students' use of the Internet and other media does not eliminate the need for thoughtful, critical use of such resources. Students need to learn "through" and "about" the various new media technologies as well as the older ones. Students must discover that all media are constructions that reflect their creators' motives. Much material on the Internet, for example, lacks credibility because any person can gain access without the checks of peer reviewers and editors. In particular, students need to recognize that many providers of media texts like Channel One, MTV, and ESPN see them primarily as markets for goods and services. Even those providers that are non-profit or non-commercial have agendas and ideologies that need careful analysis. Administrators and teachers need to scrutinize the claims of purveyors of media technologies who sometimes "oversell" the effectiveness of their products and services.

To grasp the opportunities and guard against the dangers this burgeoning media world presents, teachers across all grade levels and academic disciplines need to focus not only on the acquisition and operation of these new technologies but also on empowering students to become not just consumers of them and their texts, but also creators who use the new media technologies to engage like previous generations in the search for truth so characteristic of democratic societies. Often the children far outpace their elders in this realization. Thus, this pursuit has its dangers but also its exhilarations.

Commission on Reading (Mary H. Maguire, Director). The Commission on Reading continues to focus on four major issues identified three years ago 1) Support for Public Schooling; 2) Professional Development of Teachers; 3) Informed discussion about reading, theory, research and practice in the national and professional conversation; 4) Understanding the complex intersections among race, class gender and language in reading, literacy curriculum and practices in mainstream, bilingual multicultural communities. These issues have not gone away!! They

warrant critical reflection and action.

We are concerned about how the politics of reading has become increasingly adversarial. We have serious reservations and deep concerns about the dominance and momentum of state educational policy reforms and legislation that relies on reductive research practices distort how and why children learn to read, to become and be literate. They constrain inquiry oriented practices and narrowly prescribe what teachers can and cannot teach (e.g. the research of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development). We worry about the imposition of purported "reputable and reliable" research that mandates teachers to adopt a code emphasis and denies the complexity of teaching and learning. We continue to seek collaborative ways of communicating and working with parents, educating colleagues and the general public about the theoretical and practical issues in reading language and schooling. Issues of race, class and gender, language, multiple literacies need to become embedded in our conversations at all levels. Our contribution to this discussion includes developing a series of small brochures, synthesis sheets and speaker's packages that can easily be put into the public domain at grass roots levels and can respond to the variable needs and concerns of different communities.

We reaffirm our commitment to the Professional Development of Teachers. At the 1998 convention in Nashville, we will cosponsor a session with the Commission on Curriculum: Changing Teacher Education in Changing Times: Critical Perspectives and Approaches. We remain firm in our belief that the professional development of teachers is everyone's responsibility. We reiterate our 1997 statement: Competing voices in the educational arena raise fundamental questions about what's really behind the new educational agenda, the survival of public schooling and what governs people's thinking about what schools and teachers ought or ought not to be doing in terms of reading but also in terms of writing, language, curriculum, literature and media. Misguided notions must be challenged and replaced by informed discussions of what it means to read, to be literate, to be a learner, to be a productive citizen.

We deplore superficial and technocratic approaches to perceived reading, literacy or school problems, such as the push for more explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, the development of a linear sequential reading comprehension curriculum or creation of charter schools. Such approaches won't guarantee a nation of professional and informed educators nor critical readers and learners. Nor will they meet the needs of the diverse populations of students in schools nor ensure new learning possibilities real or imagined. The challenges are real; the debates do matter; informed responses are critical to addressing issues of equity and social justice and ensuring all students have equal access to learning opportunities.